

# Waste Reduction and Recycling: A Guide for Wisconsin Healthcare

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For many healthcare facilities that rightly focus on patient care, waste disposal has been “out of sight, out of mind.” But ignoring waste is expensive, because disposal fees, lost resources, energy costs and environmental costs add up quickly. This guide will help healthcare facilities meet the requirements of Wisconsin’s recycling law and reap the benefits of applying the waste hierarchy (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle).

## Waste Reduction and Recycling: It’s the Law!

Wisconsin’s Waste Reduction and Recycling Law [chapter 287, Wis. Stats.] and local recycling ordinances apply to healthcare facility waste as well as “walk-in” waste from patients and visitors. The state requires all businesses, including healthcare facilities, to do the following.

- Provide separate containers for the materials banned from landfills and incinerators.
- Regularly educate the occupants and users about the recycling program at their facility.
- Arrange for the collection and delivery of the recyclables to a recycling processing facility.

For a summary of the state’s recycling law, you may review DNR publication WA422 “Wisconsin’s Waste Reduction and Recycling Program” in the searchable guidance at [dnr.wi.gov/org/aw/wm/publications/](http://dnr.wi.gov/org/aw/wm/publications/).

## Waste Reduction and Recycling: It’s also the Opportunity!

When you reduce wastes and manage them well, you not only conserve resources and save money, you may also avoid potential fines; improve public relations and staff morale; improve safety; meet criteria for facilities administering Medicare and Medicaid Services and for third party accreditation (e.g., go to [www.h2e-online.org](http://www.h2e-online.org) and search the site for “Joint Commission”); and qualify for prestigious environmental awards and recognition (e.g., see [www.h2e-online.org](http://www.h2e-online.org), click on “awards”). **Why wait?**

### Materials Banned from Landfills in Wisconsin:

#### Paper:

Office paper  
Newspaper  
Magazines  
Corrugated cardboard

#### Containers:

Aluminum cans  
Steel (tin) cans  
Glass bottles and jars  
Certain plastic containers

#### Other Materials:

Major appliances  
Waste tires  
Lead-acid vehicle batteries  
Used motor oil  
Yard waste

# HIPAA and paper recycling

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requires businesses to protect patient confidentiality when discarding healthcare data. HIPAA compliant systems can actually boost your recycling rate. Shredding paper is not necessarily required; it is acceptable to use locked containers and deal with recyclers that are HIPAA compliant. For more information about recycling paper under HIPAA, visit the Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E) website at: [www.h2e-online.org](http://www.h2e-online.org). Look under the “Waste Reduction” category or search the site for “HIPAA”.

## Four Steps to Reduce Waste in Healthcare

- 1. Get both top management and employee support.** Find a champion among your top managers who can integrate recycling into company procedures and provide the time, material and equipment needed. Solicit ideas from employees at all levels. Educate employees about how to reduce and recycle waste as part of their job duties.
- 2. Select staff to implement and monitor the plan.** Select staff to manage your recycling and waste reduction plan. In a small facility, select an individual who can effectively undertake this task. In larger facilities, form a small committee of staff members from various departments such as infection control, facilities, safety, housekeeping and purchasing.
- 3. Analyze your waste stream.** Monitor your waste stream to identify what and how much is being discarded in each department in your facility. Enter this information in a waste/cost database. Talk with your custodial staff and waste haulers about collection methods, waste container needs, frequency of collection and the cost of collecting the various types of waste. Your hauler can help you optimize disposal costs. Avoid fixed fee contracts; your disposal costs should go down if you generate less waste due to recycling.

*Data is a powerful tool. If you don't know what you have, how can you prioritize your action plans, justify your programs or report on your success?*

--H2E Self Assessment Guide
- 4. Develop a waste reduction and recycling program specific to your facility.** Identify one or more ways to reduce waste in each department where waste is generated. Focus on waste that is generated in large quantities. Try to eliminate or reduce waste that is likely to negatively affect the environment (e.g., mercury, PVC plastic). Consider using more durable, longer-lasting equipment or products that can be laundered, repaired or reused. Draft a plan that includes specific objectives, clear goals, a timeline for phasing in reduction and recycling practices, costs/savings, how staff and employees will be involved, the budget, and a monitoring system.

Your facility's recycling efforts can be integrated into medical waste reduction planning required under ss. NR 526.16-.22, Wis. Adm. Code. H2E's Self Assessment guide ([www.h2e-online.org/pubs/MainAssessment.pdf](http://www.h2e-online.org/pubs/MainAssessment.pdf)) can help you evaluate your facility's waste streams, identify opportunities for improvements and enhance your environmental and waste programs.

# Case Studies:

## Healthcare facilities which have implemented Wisconsin's recycling law

### Nursing Home

*This Wisconsin nursing home has 120 patient beds with a staff of 150-160 employees.*

Recycling containers are:

- provided for patients and guests, primarily for aluminum cans, plastic bottles, and newspapers;
- located in soiled utility rooms; one large container per unit;
- used for aluminum, tin and plastic waste generated in dining areas; and
- used for all non-confidential materials (e.g., newspapers and magazines) in office areas. Confidential papers are put into a locked container and kept separate.

Through a company contract agreement, recyclables are removed free of charge. Therefore, the nursing home does not make or lose money with their recycling practices. They avoid landfill disposal costs.

### Clinic system

*These Wisconsin affiliated clinics serve between 3,000 and 60,000 patients.*

The clinics use environmentally positive purchasing whenever possible by:

- using reusable plastic totes within the system;
- using Procedure Based Delivery System (PBDS) instead of separate packaging cones in boxes;
- recycling or reusing medical supplies where applicable;
- buying non-mercury equipment and reducing or eliminating mercury in reagents and solutions; and
- purchasing is governed by a Standardization Committee that uses criteria such as reusable vs. disposable and environmentally safe disposal.

Employees are trained and informed through annual education fairs and system-wide newsletters.

The Waste and Environment Committee has representation from all major departments, including: office, custodial and patient care providers. Currently the committee is working on increasing recycling by providing better signage and placing more containers through the facilities.

### Hospital

*Licensed for 158 patients, this Wisconsin hospital has a staff of about 1,000 employees.*

In effort to **reduce** waste the facility has:

- switched to china service for meals and snacks instead of disposable dishware;
- started using room service for patients and visitors, so food is delivered on china only;
- donated extra food to a local food bank;
- monitored the waste stream to reduce the amount of "trash" they must pay to have hauled away; and
- encouraged staff to attend in-services about recycling and waste management.

The hospital **reuses** items by donating items no longer in use (e.g., beds, furniture, curtains, surgical supplies, lockers and file cabinets) to facilities in Haiti and Africa. The hospital **recycles** all paper, cardboard, plastic, tin, aluminum, glass, light bulbs, batteries, oil, anti-freeze electronics, kitchen grease, pallets and crates. Recycling containers are located at all entry points, lobbies and vending/food service areas.

The facility's CEO and directors in Environmental, Safety, Plant Operation, and Materials Management are committed to recycling. The CEO ensures success by investing money where needed and providing a consistent message to staff.

# Use the Waste Hierarchy to Save!

Following the waste hierarchy (reduce, reuse, recycle) is not difficult or expensive; in fact, it can save your facility money. Many materials can be reused or recycled, and easy changes can reduce the amount generated. Implementing simple practices can help decrease costs and protect the environment.

## Medical Supplies/Purchasing

- Work with vendors that have little or no packaging for their products.
- Buy in bulk whenever possible to reduce packaging waste.
- Purchase or ask suppliers to provide sturdy, high-quality storage and shipping containers made of plastic, wood or metal, which may be reused, refilled.

## Patient Care

- Use reusable linens for patient and surgical gowns, diapers and mattress pads increase patients' comfort as well as lower costs when compared with disposable linens.
- Use washable plates, eating utensils and glasses for patients' meals and cafeteria food.
- Minimize the use of milk cartons by installing bulk milk dispensers and using washable glasses.
- When updating equipment, donate items like beds, furniture, drapes and cabinets to other facilities.

## Custodial/Housekeeping

- Have sets of appropriate, labeled waste containers in all office, vending, reception and patient areas.
- Install air dryers in bathrooms to replace paper towels.
- Buy concentrated cleaning chemicals in bulk.
- Switch from disposable to reusable regulated medical waste containers.
- Place infectious waste containers or small infectious waste bags away from other waste receptacles.
- Install fluorescent lights or LED lights wherever possible.

## Office

- Use e-mail to eliminate paper memos and correspondence.
- Print on both sides of paper.
- Maintain a centralized and/or electronic filing system.
- Work with your hauler/recycler to determine how paper and containers should be sorted. Then set up a system to collect and recycle all types of paper, from high grade to cardboard.
- Buy recycled paper and envelopes. Recycle all your electronic waste.

**For More Information:** Contact DNR's Waste and Materials Management program at 608/266-2111 or [DNRWasteMaterials@wisconsin.gov](mailto:DNRWasteMaterials@wisconsin.gov) or visit [dnr.wi.gov/aw/wm](http://dnr.wi.gov/aw/wm) OR visit H2E at [www.h2e-online.org](http://www.h2e-online.org)

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